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ABSTRACT

In Annie Proulx's novel "The Shipping News," the anti-hero undertakes a journey of change that transforms the way he sees himself and his ways of acting and relating. This novel about the complexity of life and difficulty of change mirrors the course of wilderness-enhanced narrative therapy. Narrative therapy suggests that the sum of one's life experiences and the way one acts on that information make up the "dominant narrative" in one's interpretive structure, which molds future perceptions, beliefs, goals, and actions. Narrative therapy can help a client to deconstruct a negative dominant narrative and discover "subplots" that offer alternative interpretations of life events. In the wilderness-enhanced model of narrative therapy, students are referred to the program by the school, based on a long-term history of negative behavior and failure. Students' dominant narrative--negative self-assessment and behavior patterns--are reinforced in school and possibly at home. In the first part of the program, 10 days of wilderness experience produce extreme stresses and challenges to students in an attempt to deconstruct the dominant narrative. Participants are told that they are responsible for the way they get through the experience and are encouraged to reflect on the consequences (good and bad) of their decisions. Over the following 2 years, consistent guided reflection on an alternative self-narrative enables the students to act and interact in more positive ways. (SV)

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Stories of Change

By Paul Stolz

In Annie E. Proulx's novel "The Shipping News" the anti-hero who goes by the name of Quoyle undertakes a journey of a kind from the known to the unknown. Through this journey he comes to a different self-assessment which also produces a different way of acting and relating. In the opening chapters Quoyle is the consummate loser in Middle America, even down to the Middle American State that he inhabits. His protruding chin, of which he is uncomfortably self-conscious, is a symbol of his whole personality. He relates inadequately, except to a quirky friend who more or less takes people as they are. His inability to take responsibility for his own decisions and direction in life means that he ends up as the butt of other people's whims. So in his work, which is as a low-grade reporter on the local newspaper, he is hired and fired annually to make way for the editor's son who is home from college. He is selected by his wife-to-be at a function he attends as a reporter. His failure to acknowledge the necessity of his input into the relationship creates an unhealthy dependence, which leads to his wife ignoring him and finally leaving him and their two daughters for another man. This classic scenario is played out against the backdrop of the familiarity of small town existence where few things change and the roles ascribed to life remain embedded in the individuals belief systems and interpretive mechanisms.

All this changes when Quoyle's recently fled wife dies in a car accident with her most recent lover. The person who arrives to help Quoyle through the crisis is his maiden aunt who has her roots in the unfamiliar and wild country of Newfoundland and has a hankering to return there. Quoyle makes the decision to return with his aunt and two daughters to this unfamiliar country and in so doing undertakes a gradual journey of change which transforms him from the consummate, self-conscious loser to a capable father, employee and husband. The symbols Proulx uses to express this change wrought in the wilderness of Newfoundland are the things that comprise the common processes of life but when taken as a sum over the unfolding future in which Quoyle finds himself involved add up to a significant transformation. From the ability to handle a hammer on a roof renovation, a task Quoyle could never have imagined he could do in his past life and country, to the final assisting in the building of a new boat to replace his old one that sunk, Quoyle's life is gradually transformed. Along the way he discovers an ability to write about the shipping news that had so far escaped him. He discovers people who accept him for himself. These people are genuinely friendly and show him a respect that

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adds to respect for himself. He also learns what it means to love and be loved, a painful lesson since his only experience of what he called love was to be abused and used as a brief means to a disappointing end. As a father he acquires new skills simply by being more of a person to his two daughters and being able to express his undoubted love for them in a mutual exchange of affection and paternal concern.

As the old family home slips into the sea under the ferocity of a wild Newfoundland storm, it becomes a symbol of that old life of Quoyle's that gradually slips away to be replaced by a new home. This new home rented in one of the best locations of the village on the shores of the bay with his new wife and children is the final symbol in the book of Quoyle's transformation. He has come through the testing and challenges that the decision to move to the wilderness of Newfoundland threw up. Based on the events, that unfolded gradually, he was able to piece together another story about himself, which provides a future full of hope and confidence even in the depths of a Newfoundland winter.

Michael White's Narrative Therapy

The deceptively simple story of Proulx's which in its simplicity captures the complexity of human life and the difficulty of change mirrors the narrative therapy utilised by Michael White, a family therapist from the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide. White suggests in his description of narrative therapy that the "landscape of action" which is the sum total of all of life's experiences and the way one acts based on that information consists of events linked together in particular sequences through time and according to plot.

This structure, which makes up the story of a person's life, provides, according to White, the structure for each individual life. This personal story or self-narrative shapes life and is constitutive of life. This is termed by White the "dominant narrative" in a person's interpretive structure. Thus if ones story is based on events over time that has a negative bias the ongoing interaction of that individual is likely to be negative. In the case of Quoyle his early life in the book assumed almost overwhelming negative proportions, where he found himself locked into decisions that were based on negative assumptions about himself and his life story. This dominant narrative is in no small part the product of several cultural factors including the politics of socio-economic status, gender, race and sexuality, to name just a few. Thus what underlies the way a person acts is the reflection and interpretation that a person offers on the events of their life over time. This reflection and interpretation is moulded by the culturally dominant perspectives affecting a persons desires, wants, preferences, motives, purposes, goals, hopes, values, beliefs and commitments. White refers to this interpretive mechanism in the story building as the "landscape of consciousness."

However, White argues further that in each life story, which assumes the significance of the "dominant narrative," there can be discovered one or more sub-plots which can offer alternative interpretation to the events which have occurred in the dominant narrative. The uncovering of these sub-plots is the objective of narrative therapy to assist the client to deconstruct the dominant narrative and in so doing challenge some of its culturally dominant perspectives, thus enabling a change in the landscape of consciousness in the person. Quoyle gradually discovered for himself new possibilities based on his own resources and new experiences that freed him to make different and

more positive decisions about himself and those to whom he related. In the book this gradually translates into a whole new life story which allows the old negative, and thus far dominant narrative, to slip away like the old family house into the sea.

To encourage this change or deconstruction the therapist asks questions that encourage the person to engage in "externalising conversations" that:

- Introduce ways of speaking about life that re-politicise experience.
- Challenge the objectification of persons, and deconstruct the stories of identity that are marginalising of persons.
- Assist persons to identify and to name the techniques of power and the techniques of self that they are subject to and that they reproduce in their lives and their relationships. (White, 1991, p. 29)

These externalising conversations help a person to deconstruct their dominant narrative by:

- allowing them to identify the dominant narrative and if useful to re-name it
- allowing them to ascertain the real effects in their relationships and lives of the beliefs they hold and the practices of relating that are associated with these beliefs
- and assisting people to establish alternative and preferred identity claims and alternative and preferred practices of self and relationship.(White, 1995)

By this means Quoyle was able to deconstruct his dominant narrative by engaging in self-assessment generated by acts and interactions with himself and others. Gradually he was able to put together a new landscape of consciousness that led to a new landscape of action, or put more simply a new story that was always there but had never been allowed to surface or to be seen.

The Wilderness Enhanced Model of Narrative Therapy

In the Wilderness Enhanced Program the student (client) is referred to the program having been identified by the referring school as an individual that has a long-term history of negative behaviour or action. This negative behaviour, or landscape of action in White's model, is prompted by their reflection on the events of their lives and interpreted according to their desires, wants motives, purposes, goals, hopes, values, beliefs and commitments, or, in other words, their landscape of consciousness. The dominant narrative they therefore carry is confirmed by the institution in which they relate and spend much of their day, the school. They do little work, fail regularly and are viewed as a 'loser', whether consciously or unconsciously, by the school. This simply confirms the landscape of consciousness that determines the landscape of action, which constitutes the dominant narrative that the student produces in their interrelating. This can be a pattern reflected at home, which makes the cycle of negative self-assessment and negative action complete.

The initial part of the wilderness enhanced model, ten days of wilderness experience producing extreme stresses and challenges to the student, is an attempt to begin the process of deconstructing the dominant narrative or story the participant holds about themselves. This is contributed to by withdrawing from normal expressions of power by the leaders and a continual recognition of the emerging new story the student experiences only at this stage subconsciously. The students are told that they are responsible for the

way they get through the ten-day experience. Thus if they chose to sit for some hours on the track because their assessment of the challenge is that it is too hard, they are allowed to sit until they make an alternative decision. If they chose not to carry water when water will not be available for some hours they are allowed to suffer the consequences of their decision. Gradually the students are able to reflect on their decisions in relation to their achievements and the process of re-storying or changing the landscape of consciousness occurs.

Over the ensuing two years consistent guided reflection on what White would call unique outcomes and an alternative story to the one that dominates, gradually produces a change in the student. Interestingly this change can be first identified by a different use of vocabulary. This new vocabulary from the student indicates a responsibility for self and one's actions that was previously absent. This ability to identify and name problems and to claim ownership of them appears to disempower the claims they make over the individuals life. In addition, the success the student necessarily experiences in the ten day journey becomes the spring board for further self-assessment that is positive in nature and assists the re-storying process by offering further modifications to their landscape of consciousness.

The ability to trigger the reflection process and to help the student return to the alternative story often requires little more than the use of a key word of phrase that remains familiar to them from the ten day experience. As an example of this the writers participated in a conversation with a student who said after a number of days on the walking leg of the journey that in his life he would prefer to walk uphill rather than down. He felt walking uphill was easier and provided greater reward for effort. In conversations around life and school it is possible to assist in his reflection of where he is and where he wants to be in the future by simply asking whether at this point in time he is walking up hill or down and is this the way he wants to continue. This trigger focuses the student on the positive outcomes of his/her new story and is a useful tool for teachers in the classroom to step around a confrontation. It also serves to reinforce the emergence of the alternative story and to consolidate it as the dominant story by altering the relational interactions and modifying the landscape of consciousness from which the student acts.

The Wilderness Enhanced Model is more than just a physical activity designed to raise self-esteem in a bush setting. It seeks to challenge the dominant narrative or story by which difficult adolescents act and interact and gradually assist them to produce a shift in their landscape of consciousness that constructs a new story which allows them to act and interact in more positive and socially acceptable ways. Like Quoyle, their old house may well become uninhabitable and over time slip in to the collective sea of the unconscious and become of no value in their new life.

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